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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000770

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM PINR EAID KPAO CASC MR
SUBJECT: ARREST UPDATE

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 764

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

(C) Key Points

-- As of 1700 hours, the streets remain calm, and the police continue to maintain their typical force levels. The Embassy has discerned no threat to the Embassy, its personnel, or to the American community stemming from the arrests (reftel).

-- The Military Council this morning ordered all military officers to remain on their bases until further notice. The restriction, which does not apply to enlisted soldiers, is seen as a safeguard against potential officer-led actions against the Military Council.

-- Last night's arrests appear not to have affected planning for the referendum this Sunday. Public support appears to remain high for the Military Council and the coming elections. The people we have talked to still plan to vote.

-- The Embassy still plans to deploy its observation teams, sending between 20 and 25 Embassy officials out to observe the referendum, in close coordination with the UN Electoral Assistance Secretariat here.

(C) Comments

-- It is still too early to assess the impact this turn of events will have on the democratic transition underway here. This we do know:

 (1) The alleged plotting is the most adverse political event to occur in Mauritania since the coup 10 months ago.

 (2) The fragility of the democratization process here has increased. The USG can -- and should -- expect to see further such challenges to that process, both before and after the presidential elections scheduled for March 2007.

 (3) The arrests of alleged plotters closely associated with ousted President Taya almost certainly reveal a steadily escalating struggle among White Moor tribes, clans, and families over political power and access to Mauritania's

gathering oil wealth. We expect that struggle to intensify.

-- Ambassador and other Embassy officials have been actively reaching out today to Mauritanians to counsel continued commitment to the series of free and fair elections the Mauritanians themselves have set (see septel on Ambassador's meeting with six political parties). Our outreach will continue.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (C) The Embassy has continued meeting with civilian and military officials in an effort to get more information regarding last night's arrests of high ranking military officers and civilians associated with former President Taya (reftel), and to encourage Mauritanians to continue their commitment to democratization. While some new information has been learned, officials are tightlipped, and much remains unknown.

CONFLICTING REPORTS

¶2. (C) According to both civilian (police and security) and military officials, Colonel Sid Mohamed Ould Vaida, Colonel Abderrahmane Ould Lekwar, Mini Ould Lekwar, and Mohamed Ould Mohamed Aly have been arrested (see reftel for their descriptions). However, officials disagree on the additional arrests.

¶3. (C) Civilian officials say that no other arrests have taken place, while military officials say that Colonel

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Chrouf, Colonel Riha, and General Boukhreiss and his son were also arrested. (Note: Officials indicated that the arrests of military personnel were conducted by the Gendarmerie, while civilians were arrested by the National Police. If true, such a split may account for the conflicting reports of those arrested.)

¶4. (C) Rumors continue to circulate that influential business leaders have been arrested as well, but there has been no confirmation of such arrests.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

¶5. (C) According to military officials, the Military Council this morning ordered all military officers to remain on their bases until further notice. The restriction, which does not apply to enlisted soldiers, is seen as a safeguard against potential officer-led actions against the Military Council.

Political Impact

¶6. (C) At present, it does not appear that last night's arrests will affect the constitutional referendum this Sunday. Mauritanians have told Embassy staff that they continue to plan to vote, and that these events are more a matter of the Military Council "cleaning up" some of Taya's old supporters than "planning something." The Embassy plans to continue its observation mission. Embassy will send between 20 and 25 Embassy officials out to observe the referendum vote June 25.

¶7. (C) In response to rumors that last night's events were related to an effort by those arrested to negatively influence the vote against the referendum, PolOff attempted to contact the four political parties in the "Bloc for Change" party coalition, which had planned to boycott the election (the only coalition to take such a stand). PolOff

was unable to reach anyone in any of the parties for comment.

(Note: This is the first time PolOff has been unable to contact a Bloc for Change member in more than six months of regular contact.)

LOCAL REACTION

¶ 8. (C) Available information concerning the arrests is still quite scarce and the public has thus far reacted only to the rumors, which range from a handful of arrests to the government having put down an actual coup attempt. In either case, the public appears to continue its support for the Military Council and for the coming elections.

¶ 9. (U) According to a Reuters report, a Military Council spokesman, Sidi Ould Domane, said "a group of people nostalgic for the past are trying to impede the process of democratization the old way. They want to sabotage Sunday's referendum."

¶ 10. (C) Local speculation about the events focus primarily on supporters of former president Taya who are either trying to overthrow the current government (to allow for Taya's return) or disrupt the referendum to discredit the current government.

SECURITY

¶ 11. (C) As of 17:00 local, the streets remain calm, and the police continue to maintain their typical force levels. The Embassy has discerned no threat to the Embassy, its personnel, or to the American community stemming from the arrests.

LeBaron